

Testimony – HB 5666  
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Today, I want to tell you a story about a precocious little bundle of curly headed pink that entered my life 18 years ago. Samy thrived as an infant, hitting those all important developmental milestones early. At 18 months old, she had a vocabulary of 150 words, an uncanny sense of balance which she used to climb to the top of everything, and a running speed that any track star would be proud of. But, by age three, she had lost language and was down to ten words, did not interact with her peers, and was more preoccupied with the details of toys than how to play with them. In 1992, Samy was diagnosed with Autism.

The school system set us on an intervention path of occupational therapy, speech therapy, sensory integration, and social skills training in addition to academic learning, with parents and teachers collaborating on a wide variety of strategies and accommodations. By fourth grade, Samy could read college level material, but still could not comprehend second grade math word problems. By sixth grade, she was awarded recognition by the Hamden Board of Education as Student of the Year, and was her school's spelling champion, but she still couldn't initiate a conversation with her peers or appropriately ask for help when she needed it. Her drawing skills increased so that many of her animated characters displayed facial expressions she had difficulty processing in real time scenarios.

Currently, Samy is a high school senior, preparing to take SAT's. While she is amazing her teachers with her capacity to learn foreign languages – she sings Disney songs in at least eight different languages with perfect diction, but unfortunately, not perfect pitch - she still struggles with maintaining conversation of more than a couple of volleys. She can tell you the meaning and origin of your name, but has difficulty identifying the plot line of a story. Samy dates a wonderful young man from school, but both moms chaperone in order to provide coaching on dating behavior. And though she has tremendous aptitude with a computer, I still don't trust her to cross the street by herself.

As it was back in 1992, Samy is part of a wave of students with an autism spectrum disorder now enrolled in the education system. Like Samy, many of these students will have the capacity to become independent, fully functioning, contributing members of our society. Life skill supports that the ASD Pilot Program provides make a tremendous difference in helping these young adults learn how to navigate the real world, when thus far, we've focused primarily on the tools to be successful in a school setting. Mentoring, job coaching, and career development are key areas where this population needs support. Along with these new experiences, new sets of social skills will be required for both in and out of the workplace. These social skills will not only provide an opportunity for a balanced life, but also help to keep them safe.

Even though Samy doesn't fully grasp the concept of time, she does understand that she's a young lady; a young lady fiercely desiring her independence. So much time, effort, and expense has been invested in preparing her for success in life that it seems senseless for

there to be only very limited support services available to her as she approaches adulthood. We need appropriate services. We need trained professionals. We need to finish the job we started so that our years of progress don't end at the precipice of age 21. Please support HB 5666 for the expansion of the ASD Pilot Program. Thank you.